

THE IOWA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT VISIT PROCESS

STATE OF IOWA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
GRIMES STATE OFFICE BUILDING
400 E. 14th Street
DES MOINES, IOWA 50319-0146

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LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Chapter 256.11 - Iowa Code EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

The state board shall adopt rules under chapter 17A and a procedure for accrediting all public and nonpublic schools in Iowa offering instruction at any or all levels from the pre-kindergarten level through grade twelve. The rules of the state board shall require that a multicultural, gender fair approach is used by schools and school districts. The educational program shall be taught from a multicultural, gender fair approach and global perspectives shall be incorporated into all levels of the educational program. The rules adopted by the state board pursuant to section 256.17, Code Supplement 1987, to establish new standards shall satisfy the requirements of this section to adopt rules to implement the educational program contained in this section.

Chapter 256.11 (10)

The state board shall establish an accreditation process for school districts and nonpublic schools seeking accreditation pursuant to this subsection and subsections 11 and 12. By July 1, 1989, all school districts shall meet standards for accreditation. For the school year commencing July 1, 1989, and school years thereafter, the department of education shall use a two-phase process for the continued accreditation of schools and school districts.

Phase I shall consist of annual monitoring by the department of education of all accredited schools and school districts for compliance with accreditation standards adopted by the state board of education as provided in this section. Phase I monitoring requires that accredited schools and school districts annually complete accreditation compliance forms adopted by the state board and file them with the department of education. Phase I monitoring requires a comprehensive desk audit of all accredited schools and school districts including review of accreditation compliance forms, accreditation visit reports, methods of administration reports, and reports submitted in compliance with section 256.7, subsection 21, paragraph "a", and section 280.12.

The department shall conduct site visits to schools and school districts to address accreditation issues identified in the desk audit. Such a visit may be conducted by an individual departmental consultant or may be a comprehensive site visit by a team of departmental consultants and other educational professionals. The purpose of a comprehensive site visit is to determine that a district is in compliance with minimum standards to provide a general assessment of educational practices in a school or school district and make recommendations with regard to the visit findings for the purposes of improving educational practices above the level of minimum compliance. The department shall establish a long-term schedule of site visits that includes visits of all accredited schools and school districts as needed.

PURPOSE OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SITE VISITS

The purposes of school improvement site visit are found in 281-IAC 12.8(4) (A) (2) of Iowa Administrative Code. The purposes are as follow:

- To assess progress with the comprehensive school improvement plan
- To make recommendations with regard to the visit findings for the purposes of improving educational practices above minimal compliance
- To determine that a school or school district is in compliance with the accreditation standards
- To provide a general assessment of educational practices

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Site Visit Cycle:

All accredited non-public schools and public school districts receive a school improvement site visit led by Iowa Department of Education (DE) staff, with visits occurring on a scheduled cycle (i.e., every five years). The site visit cycle is posted on the DE Web site. Approximately 100 visits are conducted each year, including accredited non-public schools and school districts. The only criterion used for selection is the time since the last site visit.

Of the public school district site visits scheduled each year, approximately ten are identified for an in-depth focus on equity. There are several criteria used to determine who will have an equity review each year. The universe from which school districts are selected for equity reviews includes all the school districts that are scheduled to have a school improvement/accreditation visit in a given year. The criteria used to select districts from that universe include:

- A review of course and program enrollment data in career and technical programs disaggregated on the basis of sex, disability and racial/ethnic background
- The time elapsed since the district's last equity review
- Changing demographics within the boundaries of an educational agency
- Complaints received from parents, students, staff, applicants for employment or community representatives
- Referrals from other Department of Education staff or other state or regional agencies

Notification of Visit:

Late spring, each agency receiving an on-site visit during the next school year will be notified by letter. The notification letter includes information about the following:

- Legislative authority and the purpose of the site visit
- Date of the visit
- Parameters of the visit
- Makeup of the visitation team
- Information needed to prepare for the visit
- Overview of the visitation process

- Reference to the DE website address where more specific site visit information is located, such as a document review checklist, groups to be interviewed , model schedules, an interview protocol, and overview presentation guidelines

Length of Site Visit:

The on-site reviews are typically two to five days in length. This will vary with the size of the agency and whether it is an accredited non-public school or a public school district. Most all non-public school visits are two days in length. Most public school district visits are three days in length. The largest school districts in the state have four or five day visits. If there are unique accreditation issues in a school or district, the length of the visit might be affected.

Site Visit Team Membership:

The number of team members varies depending on the size of the school or district. Most non-public school site visits have two to four team members while numbers of team members on public school visits range from four to fifteen members. A greater number of team members are likely on the largest public school district site visits. The site visit team will be led by a school improvement consultant from the DE, usually the school improvement consultant assigned to the area education agency (AEA) in which the school or district is located. Remaining members of the team come from the DE, AEAs, and local schools and school districts, as required by law. Team membership might also include staff from post-secondary institutions and state educational organizations (e.g., Iowa Association of School Boards). Team member registration is accomplished through the DE Web site from May to September.

Site Visit Schedule:

Much of the site visit schedule will consist of staff interviews, review of documents, and observations during building tours. Each visit commences with a brief team orientation, followed by a district overview presentation, and ends with "Site Visit Highlights," a summarization of the more significant visit findings. Team meetings are built into the schedule each day to allow time for team dialogue and consensus building on report statements. Some interviews are scheduled separately to gain specific information about special education, career and technical education, state-wide voluntary four-year old preschool program, and equity.

School, School District, and Team Member Orientation:

Orientation sessions are held for schools and districts receiving a site visit, as well as for team members. Orientation sessions are typically conducted in September and October. Face-to-face trainings are conducted in each AEA by the DE school improvement consultant assigned to the AEA. A Power-Point presentation guides the orientation sessions. Time is provided during the orientation sessions to review the interview process, document review process, sample site visit schedules, report development process, and other school and district issues about which team members should be aware. An additional face-to-face training is held for school districts receiving a site visit with an in-depth focus on equity.

Components of the Site Visit:

Activities and processes that are consistently implemented in all site visits include document review, school/district overview, interviews, building tours, written report of findings, and site visit highlights shared at the conclusion of the site visit. On all public school district site visits, attention to equity, federal title programs, special education, and career and technical education is incorporated with more limited incorporation of these areas on non-public school visits as appropriate.

- **Document Review** – Items included in the document review are primarily based in Chapter 12 of Iowa Administrative Code requirements, as well as some requirements based in federal law. For example, Chapter 12 requirements reviewed include:

- Attendance center, program, and course enrollment data by race, national origin, gender, and disability
- Selected school board policies
- School calendar
- Administrator and teacher personnel evaluation
- Elementary, middle school/junior high school, and high school programs
- Documentation regarding the vocational advisory committee
- Documentation regarding the school district's special education program and services
- Documentation regarding the school district's gifted and talented and at-risk programs
- Documentation regarding curriculum and professional development
- Documentation regarding the school or school district's School Improvement Advisory Committee
- Personnel and student records

In addition, federal law requirements reviewed include:

- Homeless children and youth
- Title I
- English as a Second Language
- Unsafe school choice option

All of these elements are reviewed on public school district site visits, with some exceptions to this listing on non-public school site visits. The Document Review Checklist is modified each year to reflect any changes in State or Federal law and provided to school districts receiving a State Accreditation Site Visit. It is also available on the Iowa Department of Education website at: www.educateiowa.gov.

Additional documents reviewed during an in-depth equity site visit include non-discrimination grievance procedures, affirmative action plan, counseling materials, employment application, and personnel evaluation forms.

District Overview – Schools and school districts provide an overview of their educational programs at the beginning of the site visit. School leaders share accomplishments, areas of challenge, demographics of the district, progress with recommendations and non-compliances from the last comprehensive site visit, and information about the school's or district's State-wide Voluntary Preschool Program and applicable information. School leaders are provided a suggested outline by the DE to help organize thinking and planning for the overview. The outline usually follows the organizing format of the site visit report, including bulleted descriptors of each

component. See guidance document titled: Overview Presentation Guidelines at: www.educateiowa.gov.

- **Interviews** – Interviews are an essential element of the site visit process. The convergence between information learned through document review and stakeholder interviews provide validation for the contents of the site visit report. Interviews are conducted using the Conversation Starters which consist of a set of questions for each interview group.
- Interview groups include the following:
 - Administrators
 - School board members
 - General education teachers
 - Special education teachers
 - Career and Technical Education teachers
 - High school and middle school students
 - Instructional support staff
 - School advisory committees (i.e., School Improvement Advisory, Career and Technical Education Advisory, or Title I Advisory members)
 - Learning supports staff
 - Parents

Public school district site visit schedules include a separate interview with the district's special education director/coordinator. Site visits with an in-depth focus on equity include separately scheduled interviews with the following:

- District equity coordinator
 - Guidance counselors
 - Teachers of English as a Second Language
 - Gifted and talented and at-risk staff
 - School nurse
 - Human resources director
 - Director of Building and Grounds
 - Curriculum coordinator
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- **Observations** – Building tours may be included as part of the site visit. The purpose of this experience is to enhance team members' contextual understanding of the school or school district. Building tours are viewed as a way to recognize school staff for their efforts in preparation for the site visit and to provide a snapshot of the school or school district. The information is not used for evaluation of district or school personnel.
 - **Team Consensus** – The site visit team is an integral part of the process. Team members contribute to the development of the site visit report. Team members create statements of strength and recommendations for improvement based on the synthesis of documentation, interviews, and observations. Statements consist of examples and sources of strengths and recommendations for improvement. Once the statements have been drafted, the team leader leads team members through a consensus process. If consensus cannot be reached, the team leader makes the final decision on a particular statement's inclusion or exclusion from the report.

- **Exit Interview** – The team leader meets privately with the superintendent (public) or school principal (non-public) of the district or school to discuss non-compliance issues. The following procedure has been adopted beginning with the 2011 -2012 site visit season:
 - The site visit team leader shall meet with the superintendent to review the non-compliance matrix draft prior to exiting the district.
 - Following the review of the non-compliance matrix draft, the superintendent and consultant shall sign and date.

Post-Review Activities:

Approximately six weeks after the site visit, an official report is sent to the school or school district's school board president and the superintendent (public school) or principal (non-public school). During the intervening time, the site visit team leader has edited the report draft and shared the report with at least two DE consultants for editing (content, clarity, grammar, and mechanics). When a district has received a site visit that includes an in-depth focus on equity, a separate report regarding equity issues is sent at the same time as the comprehensive site visit report.

- **Organization of Site Visit Report** – The components of the site visit report have evolved over time. The site visit report is currently organized around seven characteristics of improving schools (i.e., mission, vision, and goals; leadership; collaborative relationships; learning environment, curriculum and instruction; professional development; and monitoring and accountability). The site visit report format was determined as a result of over eighteen months of studying research regarding improved schools. Non-compliances are noted at the end of the report through the Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix and the Outside of Chapter 12 Matrix.
- **Statement Regarding Accreditation** – During the 2008-2009 site visit season, the DE initiated the placement of a statement in the site visit report cover letter regarding the school or school district's accreditation. Since removal of accreditation of a district or school may be initiated through Chapter 12 or through a downward trend in a school district's finances. The Department notifies the district of its accreditation status, in part, to alert the district and the State Board of Education well in advance of initiating a Phase II process (see below). Site visit reports contain one of the three statements below:
 - **Statement A** – Based on the findings from a comprehensive site visit, including a desk audit, on-site document review, and interviews, the **local public school district/accredited non-public school** maintains State of Iowa accreditation. No non-compliance issues are noted and no corrective action plan is required.
 - **Statement B** – Based on the findings from a comprehensive site visit, including a desk audit, on-site document review, and interviews, the **local public school district/accredited non-public school** maintains State of Iowa accreditation upon resolution of non-compliance issues described in the Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix and the Outside of Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix included in the comprehensive site visit report. As stated earlier, the non-compliances revealed as a result of the visit are shared with the superintendent (public) or principal (non-public) prior to leaving the district at the end of the site visit. The **district/school** must complete corrective actions according to the timeline noted on the non-compliance web site at the DE secure log in page. Documentation of corrections

must be made available to the Site Visit Team Leader. DE follow-up will be conducted to verify resolution of all noted non-compliance issues.

- **Statement C** – Based on the findings from a comprehensive site visit, including a desk audit, on-site document review, and interviews, the **local public school district's/accredited non-public school's** accreditation is compromised. Details regarding the non-compliance issues and areas of concern are contained in this report. As stated earlier, the non-compliances revealed as a result of the visit are shared with the superintendent (public) or principal (non-public) prior to leaving the district at the end of the site visit. The Department will conduct on-going follow-up to monitor district progress. The **district/school** is hereby notified that failure to resolve the issues according to an approved corrective action plan with timelines places the **district's/school's** accreditation in jeopardy.
- **Compliance Plan** – Non-compliances will be documented and monitored via a Department of Education (DE) online program. The consultant will record the items monitored by the document review check list as met, not met, or not applicable on the DE non-compliance web site and make additional comments where needed. The school or school district has 45 days after receiving the site visit report to submit a *plan of correction* noting the corrective action that will be taken on the DE non-compliance web site, the evidence of correction that will be submitted, and a timeline for completion. The non-compliance web site information is available through the DE secure reporting site. Instructions regarding the use of the site will be provided to the district or school at the conclusion of the site visit. **Licensure non-compliances must be immediately corrected which may include removing the non-compliant teachers from the noted assignments.**
- **Monitoring Corrections** – The site visit team leader (DE School Improvement Consultant) is responsible for monitoring site visit non-compliances. If the corrective action plan is not posted to the non-compliance monitoring web site within 45 days of the site visit report being sent to the school or school district, the School Improvement Consultant notifies the district. After evidence of corrective action has been received for each non-compliance item noted, the web site generates an automated email. Once all non-compliances have been corrected and all evidence is submitted to the School Improvement Consultant, notification is sent via automated emails and in writing (e-mail or U.S. mail) that the school or school district is in compliance with the items specified in the site visit report.

Beginning in the fall of 2008, if non-compliances noted in the site visit report and on the non-compliance web site warrant, the School Improvement Consultant may elect to follow-up with the district through a phone call, email, or face-to-face meeting with district officials until the school or school district's next site visit. Such action is determined through the selection of the site visit report statement denoting the school or school district's accreditation status. Furthermore, when recommendations or non-compliances noted in a cycle's site visit report continue to surface in the next cycle's site visit, the site visit report will note such occurrence. This action is taken to alert the school or school district that inability to continuously improve is noted and can serve as further justification to initiate a Phase II (see below) visit.

Consequences of Continued Non-Compliance/Phase II:

If a school or school district is unable or unwilling to comply with accreditation requirements, a Phase II visit may be initiated. Phase II requires the use of an accreditation committee, appointed by the Director of the Department of Education, to conduct an on-site visit, if any of the following conditions exist in accordance with 281-IAC 12.8 (4) (b):

- When either the annual monitoring or the biennial on-site visit of Phase I indicates that a school or school district is deficient and fails to come into compliance with accreditation standards.
- In response to a petition requesting a Phase II visit that is signed by eligible electors residing in the school district equal in number to at least twenty percent of the registered voters of the school district and filed with the Director.
- In response to a petition filed with the Director requesting such a committee visitation that is signed by twenty percent or more of the parents or guardians who have children enrolled in the school or school district.
- The State Board of Education may direct that a Phase II visit is conducted.
- Upon recommendation of the school budget review committee for a district that exceeds its authorized budget or carries a negative unspent balance for at least two consecutive years.

Appendix:

The following documents related to the School Improvement Site Visit Process can be found on the Department of Education website at <http://educateiowa.gov/> . The school improvement documents can be located using the A - Z index under **school improvement**. The Equity Review documents can be located by using the A - Z index under **equity education**.

- **Public School Site Visit Schedule:** This document includes the schedule for School Improvement Site Visits through 2014.
- **Model School Improvement Visit Schedule with List of Required Interviews:** This document includes a link to generic model schedules for a visit. School districts adapt the model in putting together a schedule for their district. A list of staff members that must be interviewed on each visit is included.
- **Public School Document Review Checklist, Non-public School document Review Checklist:** These documents include a list of the documents which must be available and reviewed during the course of an on-site visit.
- **School Improvement Conversation Starters for Public and Non-Public School Visit Interviews:** This document includes common questions that are asked for each required interview conducted during the on-site visit.
- **LEA Site Visit Training Slide Show:** This document includes the Power Point slideshow that is used by Department Staff when conducting the orientation to the School Improvement Site-Visit Process.
- **District Overview Presentation Guidelines:** This document presents guidance to school districts on what content to include in the District's presentation to the visitation team at the beginning of the site visit, as well as a list of the seven themes of improving schools and school districts with descriptors. The seven characteristics serve as the organizer for the site visit report.

- **Educational Equity Review: Information for School Districts:** This document presents an over-view of the Equity Review Process. Equity reviews are conducted concurrently with school improvement visits in some school districts each year.
- **Educational Equity Review Guide & On-Site Manual K-12:** This document is completed by equity team members during an equity visit. It may also be used as a self evaluation tool by school districts.
- **The Equity Data Needs Manual:** Data other than BEDS data, which is needed to conduct an Equity Review.

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